

Bob Rath, President/CEO
Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®)
Testimony to the Connecticut General Assembly – Education Committee
on Senate Bill 24
February 21, 2012

Randall Williams' mom, Minnie, cried when her son graduated from Opportunity High School (OHS) this spring.

So did Randall.

"I made a lot of friends at OHS and I had wonderful relationships with my Youth Development Specialist, teachers and staff," Randall says. "I felt like I was leaving my family."

Randall was one of 40 students in the first-ever graduating class at OHS, which gives youth who have dropped out of other high schools a second chance to earn a diploma.

"Randall didn't do very well at Hartford High," his mom admits, "but the folks at OPP and OHS really helped him turn his life around. I think he surprised himself by how well he did in school and the fact that he graduated with honors."

"OHS has a very unique and supportive learning environment," explains Mike Nelson, one of OPP's Youth Development Specialists at the school. "Our classes are small, our teachers are committed, and each student has a YDS who helps them map out their future. Everyone gets a lot of personal attention here and the tools to succeed. We're all very proud of what Randall accomplished. It's been a pleasure working with him and seeing him develop and grow. Although well on his pathway to success, Randall still comes back to visit and we hold him up as a role model for students at OHS today."

This fall, Randall enrolled at Capital Community College, but this is just the start of his journey. "I love animals and I wanted to be a zoologist someday," he says. "Before I went to OHS, I didn't think that would be possible. Now...I don't believe there are any limits on what I can do."

This success story is just one of many that have come out of Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) and Opportunity High School (OHS). As a youth development agency, OPP serves over a thousand struggling urban youth just like Randall every year, helping them to get through high school and on to post-secondary programs and fulfilling careers. Our partnership high school with Hartford Public Schools, OHS, has allowed us to bring this focus into the school system, specifically serving over-age, under-credit (OU) students with the best elements of the youth development, academic support, and workforce readiness fields – a program that we call Pathways to Success.

Among other approaches to engage our target population, OHS' leadership has worked hard to recruit teachers who are dedicated to our school's particular mission, and best suited to address the specific needs of our students. This approach has paid off, as seen by the impressive results achieved by OHS students. Just one example of this is the fact that last year, 95% of OHS students earned more credits than they had in their previous year of high school

(before coming to OHS). This is a clear indication that the research is right – **great teachers and principals can change students’ lives**. The students who come to OHS have become disconnected in school, leading them to become OU youth. But the highly qualified and dedicated staff at OHS re-engage them in education, and help them to turn their lives around.

With an estimated 30-40,000 OU youth across Connecticut, every school needs to recruit these same types of exceptional teachers and principals to improve student performance. **S.B. 24 takes important steps toward ensuring that this will happen, particularly in the highest need schools and districts.** The grant incentives that are proposed for recruitment of top college graduates will help high need districts attract highly qualified and well-educated teachers. The incentives proposed to encourage exemplary teachers and administrators to work in high need districts and schools will also be crucial to this effort. Further, bolstering teacher preparation programs will also help to ensure that well-prepared teachers are entering the labor market.

Professional development improvements will be particularly important for teachers in high need districts. **The new individualized approach proposed in S.B. 24 will give them the opportunity to gain training specific to their work, rather than general continuing education courses.** Perhaps most important are the proposed overhauls to the teacher certification, tenure, and dismissal procedures. By focusing both of these areas on teacher effectiveness, we will be continuously reviewing our teacher population, giving our students only those teachers who can truly help them to succeed.

These components all go a long way to improving one of the key pieces of our education system. **The Governor’s bold strides toward education reform are clear in these ambitious proposals, but if we truly want to serve all of Connecticut’s students at the highest possible level, there are ways to further strengthen S.B. 24.** OPP’s first suggestion follows the core component of our value statement and the foundation of everything that we do: youth first! The student population has a voice and it needs to be heard. OPP recommends creating a place for students in the hiring and evaluation processes for teachers, particularly at the upper middle school and high school levels. As any of our staff members will tell you, a student’s ability to relate to and connect with their teacher is a key indicator of whether they will achieve in the class.

More specifically, our at-risk urban youth come from a difficult background that stands in stark contrast to Connecticut’s suburban and rural communities. In order to connect with these students, **teachers must achieve a level of cultural competence around the issues that our urban youth face on a daily basis.** OPP’s second recommendation is for the bill to add requirements that teacher preparation programs begin to address this within the standard curriculum. We recommend that all teacher preparation programs provide in-depth youth development training throughout their curricula. This will give teachers the foundation of understanding how to look at where each student is coming from to address their needs and engage them in education – a skill that is crucial in urban, suburban, and rural communities alike. Professional development opportunities once teachers are in place will go a long way toward helping them gain a deeper specific cultural competence for their area. However, this foundation of youth development training will be key in allowing them to reach all students, including at-risk urban youth, in a more effective way from the first day of class.

Our third recommendation addresses this same need for high quality educators who are already teaching effectively in other areas of the state. S.B. 24 provides much-needed incentives to get these effective teachers into high need areas. However, it must also provide prior training opportunities to prepare them; as the purpose of the proposal in S.B. 24 is to recruit teachers who are not already in these high need areas, they will likely lack the experience and preparation that will be crucial to carrying over their success into high need schools and districts. **We recommend that a youth development and cultural competence training program be offered to these recruited teachers, along with the incentives package, prior to the beginning of their new positions.**

While these measures, both those already proposed in S.B. 24 and those included in OPP's recommendations, will work to ensure that only highly effective teachers enter the classroom, we must consider teacher dismissal and layoff procedures, as well. S.B. 24 takes huge steps to improve our state's tenure and dismissal processes – something that will no doubt have an immense impact on our student population. However, there is a key element missing. For many years, our state's teacher layoff process has treated teachers as interchangeable cogs, rather than as unique individuals with unique abilities to contribute to student learning. It has also made the assumption that teachers improve with time on the job, a theory that has continually been proven wrong, most recently by research through the Gates Foundation's "Measures of Effective Teaching" project. In the case of OHS, we have worked hard to recruit and train teachers dedicated to our specific mission and students. If teachers from other schools are allowed to bump out teachers at OHS who hold this specialized training, we lose a critical investment that has been made to prepare our staff – and more importantly, we lose a critical element of our success in re-engaging OU youth in education. **With the improved tenure and dismissal procedures outlined in S.B. 24, last-in, first-out budget driven layoffs no longer have a place in Connecticut. Both dismissals and budget driven layoffs alike should be based on measures of job performance and effectiveness, not seniority.**

Connecticut cannot afford to continue stalling on important education reforms, including those aimed at our teachers and school administrators. With every high school dropout costing the state over \$500,000 over his/her working lifetime, we must do everything possible to ensure student achievement in our schools. Every Connecticut youth deserves an education that adequately prepares them for the life ahead, beginning with access to only the highest quality and most effective teachers. **We at OPP can see that S.B. 24 provides critical solutions to many of our state's issues in this area, and strongly urge the Education Committee to support its reform measures.**